

7. SNOW GOOSE *ANSER CAERULESCENS* — AN ADDITION TO THE INDIAN AVIFAUNA

The only reference to the snow goose *Anser caerulescens* in Indian literature is that of a white goose shot in Kashmir in February 1950 (Editors 1950). However, on later examination the specimen was found to be a partial albino of a greylag goose *Anser anser*, thereby expunging the snow goose from the Indian list (Abdulali 1966, Ali and Ripley 1983). This paper presents observations made on a single snow goose, observed twice and photographed in early January 1989 at a reservoir in Gujarat.

OBSERVATIONS

In January 1989, a team from the Department of Biosciences, Saurashtra University, and the World Wide Fund for Nature – India, Saurashtra Division, Rajkot, carried out surveys of waterbodies in the Saurashtra region of Gujarat as part of the third Asian Midwinter Waterfowl Count, the complete results of which will appear elsewhere.

On 9 January at 0940 hrs we reached Muli reservoir (22°39'N, 71°30'E), which is also known as Naika-I or Wadhwan Bhogawo-I and is situated north-east of the town of Muli (Surendranagar district). From the dam wall in the east, we observed a flock of geese on a mud bank on the north-west side of the reservoir. The flock consisted of 23 barheaded geese *Anser indicus* and one very conspicuously white goose. We were too far away to see the bird clearly and so we skirted about the reservoir to get a better view.

The land bordering the water here was cultivated with cotton *Gossypium* sp. and tall stands of *Eucalyptus globulus*. There was a small pond bordering the main reservoir with just a wall separating them. Along the wall was a thick growth of mesquite *Prosopis chilensis* that was being cut down by villagers. A goat herd tended his flock that fed close to the water's edge. Just beyond the wall and continuous with it was a gently sloping mud bank with geese at the farther edge. Some of the birds rested on the grass growing on the bank. Others fed on vegetation that had emerged with the fall in water level. The white goose consorted with the group and fed. They were not disturbed by our presence, nor by the goat herd, his goats and the woodcutters.

Using a telescope, we were able to observe the finer points of this white goose very clearly. It stood slightly taller than the barheaded. It was entirely white except for the ends of the wings which at rest formed a

black wedge above a white tail. The head was stained a dull yellow in the region of the forehead and ahead of the eyes and ear coverts. The feathers on both sides of the neck formed parallel creases slanting upwards towards the nape. The bill and legs were two shades of pink, in clear contrast to the yellow bill and legs of the barheaded.

The geese lifted off together and flew to a neighbouring mud bank when approached closer. This provided us an excellent opportunity to observe them in flight. The white goose had black primaries, light grey primary wing coverts and these contrasted well with the rest of the white wing feathers. The barheads in comparison were a light grey with dark grey black retrices and remiges. From all these field characters, it was clear that the white goose was an adult snow goose *Anser caerulescens*.

Two days later we visited the reservoir again to document the bird on film. The gaggle was at the same spot and the birds permitted close approach. A flock of demoiselle crane *Anthropoides virgo*, a pair of Indian black ibis *Pseudibis papillosa* and a small group of ruddy shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea* also rested with the group. The geese were photographed satisfactorily.

DISCUSSION

The reservoirs of Surendranagar district of Gujarat are now well known wintering sites for migratory geese. Raol (1988) first recorded a flock of barheads at Muli on 14 January 1984. Since then, barheads, and/or greylag goose *Anser anser* have been observed here every winter and some of the observations have been summarised by Van der Ven (1987) and Daniel (1988). But this is the first time that we have observed the snow goose.

The only previous reference of the snow goose in India is of a white goose shot from a flock of nine greylags by George Nedou on 26 February 1950 (Editors 1950). On later examination of the bird by Humayun Abdulali and S.D. Ripley, it was found to have been wrongly identified, and was in fact a partial albino greylag (Abdulali 1966). One of us (T.M.) has examined this specimen in the collection of the BNHS. The primaries are a shade of dull brown and quite unlike the jet black in the goose we saw. Colour transparencies of our observations clearly show the black primaries and other important identification features of the species.

To the best of our knowledge there are no snow geese maintained in captivity in India and so the possibility of this bird being an escapee from collections within the country is remote. We therefore conclude that the snow goose should be once again added to the list of Indian avifauna.

The breeding range of the snow goose extends from north-east Siberia, west to north-west Greenland and across arctic North America (Cramp and Simmons; 1977). The wintering grounds in Asia are in east China and Japan. In Europe it is considered an annual vagrant, but due to escapees from waterfowl collections there, the status there remains impossible to determine. The bulk of the arctic population however winters in North America and mainly around the Gulf of Mexico.

The snow goose should at present be strictly considered as a vagrant here. One possible explanation for its presence in India may be that the bird travelled

down with the cold front that caused a severe winter over much of north and central Asia during December 1988 and January 1989.

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8. SHIKRA *ACCIPITER BADIUS* TAKING CARRION

A blue rock pigeon *Columba livia* was found dead on 6 June 1988, at 0600 hrs on the lawn of Darbargadh palace at Jasdan in Saurashtra, Gujarat. It had been killed by the palace dogs the previous night. House crows *Corvus splendens* fed on the corpse during the morning and at 1400 hrs a shikra *Accipiter badius* was observed feeding on it. Disturbed by our presence it flew with the carcass to a tree in the compound. Raptors are opportunists and species of the genus *Aquila* and *Haliaeetus* are known to feed frequently on carrion when opportunity avails (Ali and Ripley 1978, Brown and Amadon 1968, Brown *et. al.* 1982, Cramp and Simmons 1983, Clark and Wheeler 1987, Gensbol 1987). This appears to be an uncommon feeding behaviour among *Accipiters*. Ali and Ripley (1978), Brown and Amadon (1968), Brown *et. al.* (1982), and Cramp and Simmons (1983) make no mention of this habit though Newton (1986) states that the only

evidence that the closely related sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* take carrion (apart from their previous kills) was the fact that they were occasionally poisoned when they took meat baits put out by gamekeepers. A photograph by B.E. Swann (in Gensbol 1987) shows a goshawk *Accipiter gentilis* and white-tailed eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* at laid out carrion in winter.

Apparently *Accipiters* do take carrion in times of stress but this is the first record of a shikra doing so. Incidentally Saurashtra at this time was reeling under the third consecutive year of drought, but the two pairs of shikra I observed successfully reared young. The shikra was a daily visitor to the compound. Probably the same individual was earlier observed taking a displaying adult magpie-robin *Copsychus saularis* vulnerably exposed near its nest box.

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